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Streetwalking on a Ruined Map

By *Giuliana Bruno*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

I used to think that book reviews should be like summaries informing readers about the book's content in as descriptive a mode as possible. As a rule, then, I would take the salient traits of each chapter (in my opinion) and proceed in a very linear way, aiming to reflect the book's trajectory. As I am sitting in front of the computer with Giuliana Bruno's *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, I find reviewing it in accordance with my usual strategy virtually impossible. This impossibility might well serve as a starting point. In the attempt to grasp this book's design, polyhedral, multilateral, and web-like are the adjectives that come to mind, but that is not quite enough, there is something more, something that has to do with movement, motion.

A book whose signifying structure mimes the signified content, not only does *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* inscribe cinema and spectatorship within metropolitan movement, but it is itself a book in and of motion. Bruno emphasizes this by making various notions of movement pivotal in her arguments and by entitling both the entire book and three of its five parts after spatial and mobile coordinates (PART II. Film in the Cityscape: A Topoanalysis of Spectatorship; IV. The Metropolitan Texture; V. Female Geographies).

Streetwalking on a Ruined Map has an incessant pendular, Brownian motion between the micro- and

macro-historical levels.

The micro-historical explores the work of Elvira Coda Notari (1875-1946), the "first and most prolific Italian woman director" (3). Working within the fertile terrain of Neapolitan silent cinema, Elvira Notari ran, together with her husband Nicola, the Dora Film (1906-1930), and directed some sixty feature films (many of which employed her son Edoardo as an actor) and over a hundred shorts and documentaries. "A film pioneer lost in a male-dominated culture" (4), she was forgotten by film history. First censored by Fascism—the antirealist ideology which would later find its "democratic" reenactment in the Andreotti vs. neorealism incident—Notari's work would later be relegated, at best, to the status of a footnote. It is no accident that perhaps the most sensitive reference to her work and role in the history of Italian cinema (a precursor of neorealism) came from Mira Liehm, a woman, from the left, in her book *Passion and Defiance*. Thus uncovering one of the paradigmatic cases of censorship intrinsic to Italian cultural history (film history being part of it), Bruno's micro-historical research implicitly operates on a political and epistemological plane at once. On the political, it is the revindication of *savoir mineurs* and the implicit denunciation of a patriarchal form of discursive censorship. On the epistemological, this book on a realist filmmaker performs one of realism's most typical and intriguing gestures: giving discursive presence to voices that have been put to sleep.

With only three extant films, Notari's filmography is a ruined

map. As the usual points of reference are missing, the activity of the knowing subject, Bruno's subjectivity, comes to the fore. In fact, one regrets that most books are written on wholly legible maps and thus operate within the illusion of objective scholarship. Utilizing filmic fragments, stills, scripts and other writings such as novelizations, tickets, posters, Bruno engages in a fractal exploration of the area in which text and context meet and succeeds in offering an engaging picture of Notari as she operated in the belly of Naples (Serao's *Il ventre*) a city caught in the process of becoming "metropolitan texture" and related, as Notari's success among Italian immigrants testifies, to the Ur-metropolis New York.

Let us now talk about the macro-historical. Association is the elementary process at the heart of the interpretive activity: to give a text its meaning, one connects it to other texts and therefore creates a hypertext. In many cases, however, the illusory completeness of the map limits the scope and horizon of the hypertextual dimension.

The movement of the book is consciously hypertextual. As in Brian Eno's music, one insistent motif flakes off into layers of sound to create an auditory palimpsest, Bruno's microhistorical research branches out rhizomatically and forays into territories and problematics touched upon by Notari's practice and theory-contained-in-her-practice. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* is thus also a series of "inferential walks" (a term borrowed from Eco) into the interconnectedness of film, architecture, photography, and painting—the history

of Naples. In yet another sense, the book is an immense act of emigrant love towards Naples; Italian history and geo-politics (South vs. North axis); cultural methodology and epistemology; and various problems in film theory such as that of female spectatorship which Bruno wrenches away from a Lacanian fixity and launches into a mobile metropolitan space of trains, arcades, boulevards.

Pushing on the metaphor of the hypertext, we discover concepts which readily apply to Bruno's book's quintessential movement: interface and navigation. Unlike what happens in the metaphysics of homogeneity, the concept of interface makes us realize the heterogeneity of the real: every process, every translation, every relation in the order of interfering. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* is about the creation of interfaces between film authorship and spectatorship and other cultural productions. The hypertextual dimension of Bruno's exploration effects a change in the mode of consumption required from the reader: from reading to "navigating," as computer specialists call it. As the experience of sailing navigation is perhaps less for the subaltern groups than streetwalking, we can say that Bruno popularizes and "feminizes" the metaphor for hypertextual consumption: *passeggiata*.

As if flashing a series of postcards or glimpses from a train, and frames of panoramic shots, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* invites its readers to indulge in the art of *flanerie*, *passeggiata* with a camera. Intriguingly, however, the camera we are invited to take along does not have a fixed focal length but alternates, with a zoom-

like motion, between a wide angle and a macro-lens. The wide angle allows Bruno's and the reader's gaze to embrace large, panoramic portions of the visual field and therefore perceive a series of connecting perspectival relations that in perfect keeping with the metaphor of the ruined map, are subject to the distortion of the wide angle; a distortion that must be "corrected" by the reader who thus becomes aware of his/her role in the making of the image. Then there are plunges into the fractal world of microhistory, the macrolens blowing up details in the map into sites/sights, metonymically suggesting the shape of the whole from what is missing.

It comes as no surprise that a crucial term in Bruno's book is *transito*, a word she leaves in Italian—a signifier thus brought into relief. *Transito* indicates Notari's cinema literally at the crossroads of Neapolitan cityscape and Bruno's camera the transient focal length. Film spectatorship, no longer enchained to the passivity of a prisoner in Plato's cave, is also a matter of *transito*. Imagined in term of fluidity and mobility, female desire is itself, of course, a *transito*. And the discourse of women, as that of other marginalized groups—all those who encounter difficulties "matching one's own image unless through excessive ana/logos or with a mask" (229)—is also characterized by *transito* and transvestitism in the form of a metaphorical tension, a search for metaphorical recipients of one's socio-discursive positioning and identity. In sum, *transito* implies mobility rather than fixity, process rather than essence, nomadism rather

than sedentariness, thereby suggesting the position Bruno would take in the domains where these opposites are pertinent and circulating.

Just as with the images reflected on the train windows, where you occasionally catch glimpses of yourself looking, there is an extent to which Bruno's book forces you into a sort of self-awareness: readers inevitably explore paths of sense congenial to their desires. You know that drawing of an ambiguous figure where, depending on how the viewer looks at it, either a young woman or a very old woman can be seen? Imagine that drawing becoming animated, and moving, and travelling, always on a double level of reading. You can never see the two images at once, you can only imagine them; hence you decide which image you'll be focusing on and you become aware of your desire. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* acts a bit like that, for it is ultimately up to your desire to decide which alley to take, in your *passeggiata*, with a macro-to-wide zoom lens.

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The Scorpion's Dark Dance

By Alfredo de Palchi.
Riverside, CA: Xenos Books, 1993.

Looking at history with eyes wide open, it is quite possible to conclude that, left to our own devices, we humans are an unpalatable species.